

THOMAS COOK'S UNDERGROUND MAIL

Rosemary Smith

Just two days after I had typed up my "Editor's Comments" I received a letter from Stephen Steere. This was exactly the kind of letter I meant in my comment about all members have something of interest in their collection.

Stephen had bought a cover in a club auction for 'peanuts'. I quote from his letter:- "*. . . there was a very tatty and discoloured cover with both a foreign stamp and a KG VI 2½d used upon it. A piece of paper was stuck on the front with a typed address and it had an examiners (censor) label. I thought it was a typical re-used envelope that is common to find used during the last war. The perfin was "TC/S" with the identity of Thomas Cook handstamped on the label*"

As no one bid and it had a perfin on it, Stephen reluctantly bought it! "*When I got home I looked at my 'gem ' then realised it had been posted in the Netherlands on 15 December 1940 so how could it have got to England? The back of the cover had a whole line of German handstamps so it came out of the occupied area. I carefully peeled back the label and saw that it had been sent to a post box in Lisbon, Portugal, the addressee name being the same as on the stuck on label. The Thomas Cook handstamp is dated the 15th March 1941 and the postmark is London on 17 March 1941.*

I can only assume that the correspondence was deliberately sent to Portugal for onward transmission to England, I assume by hand and then reposted on arrival. A quite ingenious way of sending a letter, just a shame the content is missing, but just what was so important, and were such arrangements made before war started? I suppose we will never know the answer, but the cover now has a good reason to be tatty. "

I could not believe my eyes when I saw the two photocopies of the front and back of this "tatty" cover, which Stephen had enclosed with his letter. It was obvious that Stephen had never heard of Thomas Cook's Underground Mail through **P.O.Box 506**. I could hardly wait to eat my evening meal before I rang Stephen.

The first thing I asked was his buying price: I then asked him to tell me the post box number underneath the label. When he looked and said "P.O. Box 506" I definitely knew what this cover represented. When I told Stephen how much these covers are worth he could hardly believe me.

Many years ago, at Sheffield Philatelic Society, we had a speaker who gave a display of this underground mail. I had never seen any before and I have never seen any since. In 1984, as background to writing up my Thomas Cook covers, I called in at the Sheffield branch of Thomas Cook and asked if they had a history of the company. A very helpful young man took my name and address and said he would have one sent on. A brochure with the history duly arrived but they also sent me the current copy of their internal news magazine. Once again, it almost beggars belief, but there was an article in it entitled **The Thomas Cook Cover Story with sub heading Secret mailboxes, sub post offices, perforated stamps are all part of the Thomas Cook undercover mail story**. Even more strange was the fact that the contents in the article and the illustrations of covers and perfins came from Boris Pritt, one of our older members, now sadly deceased, whose presence at the London meetings will be remembered by many. The relevant part of the article for our purposes is:-

".. . . in World War 1, Thomas Cook were asked by the Government to act as intermediaries in the mailing of private letters to people in enemy territory. This service began in 1917 and people wishing to correspond

with people behind enemy lines were asked to send their letters to Thomas Cook, who sent them to Thomas Cook office in Geneva which then sent them on into enemy territory.

A similar, but unofficial arrangement, also seems to have operated during the Spanish Civil War, when letters from the opposing Republican and Nationalist sides were sent to Gibraltar which then posted them on to the addressee.

In 1939, Thomas Cook were once again asked to take on the mail behind enemy lines service; this time they did so through a post box, first in Amsterdam then in Lisbon. P.O. Box 506 thus became the loophole through which people on both sides of enemy lines could communicate with each other. Between 1940-1945, there were 21 European countries in German hands that could be communicated with by means of the Thomas Cook P.O. Box. The letters were, of course, censored and the information contained was necessarily trivial, but the fate of some of the recipients can be guessed at by letters returned unopened to P.O. Box 506, as in the case of a German, who the sender from Britain discovered later had been sent to Auschwitz.

The service provided by P.O. Box 506 continued for a while after the war, providing during the period of rebuilding of public services, the same means of contact and the messages of hope that it had kept going through the darker days of the war."

So look more carefully at your Thomas Cook covers. You too may find a nice surprise.

